

Book Review

Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain: The Ethnography of Political Violence by Mohan Ambikaipaker, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018, 272 pages, 6x9, 23 illus., \$65, ISBN 9780812295160 (hardcover)

In 2016, when students at a British university included images of singer Zayn Malik and London mayor Sadiq Khan in their promotion of Black History Month, their decision went viral on social media and was met with a lot of backlash. Over the years, and more recently, with a new wave of anti-racist activist movements and various professional and academic programming on diversity and inclusion, there has been an extensive debate on how to describe the collective voice of the minority and marginalized people in the West who share experiences of racism and racial discrimination based on their skin colour or heritage. Ethnic minority, person of colour (PoC), Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME), diverse, and non-white, are just a few of the classifications that have been used to refer to historically marginalized groups. All these terms have been used in various spaces as labels of control, administration, commodification, as well as communication, and activism.

The term ‘political blackness’, which arose in the 1970s and 1980s among trade union workers in the UK, has been an important concept in the British anti-racist movement for decades. It represents the historical solidarity and alliances among various groups in response to white supremacy. But how relevant is this idea today?

In *Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain*, social anthropologist Mohan Ambikaipaker reflects on his time spent as a social caseworker (in 2005–2006) with a community-based anti-racism organisation in London, the Newham Monitoring Project (NMP), that supports victims of racism, and fight racial injustices perpetuated by the British State. He presents an ethnographic study that explores what political blackness looks like as the people in and around Newham advocate for positive social change. In this study, Ambikaipaker aims to “understand the long-standing weakness in failures of anti-racism and a liberal, political-judicial social order” (p. 25) by looking at the relationship between official anti-racist state policies, institutionalized racism, and the racial violence experienced by non-white communities in Britain.

To do this, Ambikaipaker relies on critical race theory and postcolonial-decolonial theory as his conceptual frameworks and an “activist-oriented” (p. 33) approach in his methodology to build this powerful ethnography, which comprises of participant observations, interviews, and historical narratives. He underscores the role of his own positionality as a non-white anthropologist from a former British colony—thereby also shaped and affected by Britain’s imperial legacy—in guiding his research, thus breaking away from what he identifies as the modus operandi of the “traditional white male anthropologist” (p. 33).

The book reveals the character of Newham as a dynamic, multi-cultural and cosmopolitan borough, by covering the stories of some of the people that Ambikaipaker directly worked with during his time as a caseworker, as well as some more high-profile cases that made British news. These people include a single mother of Indian heritage (Amina), a woman of African-Caribbean descent (Gillian), a group of British-Bangladeshi Muslims, as well as several NMP caseworkers and activists.

Ambikaipaker sets the stage for these stories by first providing a historical, contextual analysis of the structural, social and political power of white Britain, while also tracing the evolution of Britain’s socio-political racial ideology through the peak and decline of its global empire. In each subsequent chapter, he addresses a different segment of the racialised landscape of political whiteness in contemporary Britain that hurts black communities every day. For instance, in Chapter Two, Amina’s ordeal with the law-enforcement and judicial systems illuminates how white police officers, lawyers and judges work together to facilitate the dismissal of racial harassment claims made by victims, especially in light of the state’s move to privatize social services, thereby removing many legal and accountability structures that would entitle people to support. Chapters Three and Four examine the intersectional nature of racial violence by focusing on women of colour and Muslim groups, while Chapter Five addresses how the message of multiculturalism is manipulated to mask racist State policies that seek to control non-white communities. Citing, for instance, the State’s counter-terrorism agenda which specifically targets the Muslim community, this book argues that British racism has not been confined to the imperial, colonial era but still persists today in new forms.

The book concludes with an explanation of Ambikaipaker’s use of ‘blackness’ to encompass all these multi-racial and multi-ethnic categories earlier described; a choice the reader may have been questioning since the introduction of his first case. Throughout the book, it is evident that he is referring to all non-white communities as ‘black’, not culturally or ancestrally, but in a political sense. Both Ambikaipaker and NMP politicise blackness as a way to incorporate “the joint realities of multiple ethnic, racial, and religious minority communities suffering racism in Britain” (166) and garner solidarity between otherwise fragmented communities in order to more effectively fight racial violence sustained by the white solidarity he earlier describes, when detailing Amina’s denial of justice by the law enforcement and judicial systems in place. Ambikaipaker offers examples of solidarity in political blackness when he recalls the Newham community rallying and picketing in

support of the group known as the Newham 7, the Justice for Pryce campaign¹, as well as other grassroots cases of activism manifesting through art, music, and radio programming, to name a few.

Political Blackness in Multiracial Britain is written and organised in a way that makes it accessible to the academic, practitioner and lay reader who is interested in racial justice work; a rare feat. This subject is often approached differently by these groups, and this book serves as a bridge for conversations that have been happening across isolated spaces. This book offers a strong theoretical lens for evaluating the racism and violence that emerges out of the paradox between Britain's race-neutral policies and British white society, while at the same time, using NMP as a backdrop, presents other activists with a toolbox of strategies to consider in the work towards attaining racial justice. With its rich descriptive and narrative style, the stories that make up this book reflect an eclectic melange of identities and experiences within the black communities of Newham, while at the same time putting a spotlight on widespread institutional racism in Britain.

As we continue to seek an understanding and consensus on 'correct' descriptions of socio-cultural and racio-ethnic identities, this book shows how anti-racist work continues to grapple with an important question: does one base anti-racism organizing around the solidarity of shared issues or on creating a shared identity. Put differently, does 'political blackness' erase the differences of identities and experiences or create a powerful alliance? On this, Ambikaipaker leaves the reader to make their own conclusions.

Yaa Oparebea Ampofo (ampofo@wisc.edu) is a doctoral candidate in Educational Policy Studies at the School of Education, University of Wisconsin, Madison, U.S.A.

¹ These were a series of campaigns and demonstrations organized after the racist attacks on the Asian community and the wrongful detainment of 7 Asian suspects. Then, following the murder Eustace Pryce and the detainment of his brother while his murderer was granted bail, the Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities came together to protest these related injustices.